

Flathead County Transportation Advisory Committee

Minutes

Thursday, January 7, 2021

Meeting was held via <https://zoom.us/j/97951747734?pwd=YkdNVEJnZkNmVDJsYnBReHBiZDFoQT09>

Meeting ID: 979 5174 7734

Passcode: 882489

Members Present: Randy Brodehl (Commissioner), Jenny Cloutier, Jeny Covill, Shawna Himsl, Jessica Kramer, Marcy Roberts, Robert Smith, Tagen Vine, Kevin Warrington, Kyle Waterman (Chair)

Staff Present: Lisa Sheppard (Agency on Aging Director), Dale Novak (Transit Manager), Kristina Stone (Transit Office Coordinator), Elizabeth Wood (Dispatcher)

Guests: Mary Riddle and Ma'ayan Dembo (Glacier National Park), Val Hemsley (ASSIST), Amanda Paul (MT Vocational Rehabilitation)

Call to Order: Chair Kyle Waterman opened the meeting at 2:00 pm.

Public Comments: There was no public comment.

Chair Opening Remarks: Kyle welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked them for their willingness to participate in an additional planning meeting. He noted that real change has happened as a result of public and member input in the past and gave the example of fixed route improvements in response to concerns expressed about the length of the route and poor on-time performance. He encouraged everyone to voice their thoughts and ideas to benefit the system.

Approval of Minutes: The December minutes are not yet available. They will be sent out prior to the February meeting.

Discussion:

- Kyle opened by sharing some of the items on his priority list:
 - Hiring a new director to ensure a smooth transition as transit becomes a county department separate from the AOA.
 - Continuing to explore ways to effectively serve the Evergreen area
 - Consideration of weekend and evening service
- Tagen mentioned that transportation to medical appointments is one of our biggest challenges, that it is routinely identified as a priority in community needs assessments. He noted the ASSIST Program provides transportation to health care appointments as well.
- Shawna stated she has spoken to many people in her job at the County Health Department who have expressed interest in park & rides. Others have mentioned a need for Friday or Saturday evening service.
- Jeny Covill talked about the need for transportation for people being discharged from North Valley Hospital at odd hours, evening and weekends, some of whom need hands-on assistance during transport and upon getting to their destination and others who are homeless or have other challenges, including substance

abuse or difficult behavior. Some need to travel to Kalispell to the Warming Center. It is very difficult to rely on taxis for these patients. This represents a service gap, but it may not be fillable by public transit.

- Lisa noted our drivers are not allowed provide hands-on assistance like transferring (anything beyond helping someone get on and off the bus, secure a wheelchair) or go into a person's home.
- Lisa reminded the group that pre-COVID one of our goals was to establish a community stakeholder workgroup to look at the issues surrounding transportation related to health care and develop potential solutions. Members agreed it would be good to include this as a priority for the coming fiscal year.
- Dale brought up a volunteer driver program as a possible option to help with medical rides (among other things). He mentioned that we have vans available for that type of program, but noted the bigger question is funding for other costs such as a volunteer coordinator, back-up drivers, etc.
 - Kyle mentioned that perhaps the hospitals and other agencies could be a source for volunteers, or possibly take on the program if we provide the vehicles.
 - Jeny said that volunteers are wonderful but that because they are volunteers you have to have a back-up plan, and some of the work might not be appropriate for a volunteer.
 - Commissioner Brodehl noted that volunteer programs are easier to start than to maintain. Lisa agreed, saying they require much more investment (time and money) than people think.
 - Lisa said that last year (again pre-COVID) pursuing a Volunteer Driver Program was one of our plan priorities. Members agreed we should further explore it as an option once the new director is on board.
- Shawna suggested that we don't have a strong transit system relative to the need and it's important to ask ourselves what our vision is and look at what fits into that vision when evaluating options. Lisa and Dale both responded that it's always a difficult task to figure out where we get the most bang for our buck given limited resources and competing needs.
- Shawna expressed support for collaborating with other community entities. One example might be allowing the Warming Center to have use of an existing van or helping them to get a van.
- Val from the ASSIST Program mentioned that they provide rides to medical appointments and that they are trained and allowed to assist riders inside their homes. They are also getting another van next week that can support bariatric riders.
 - Jeny thanked Val for sharing that information, stating options for bariatric transportation are really needed in the Valley.
- Commissioner Brodehl noted that we need to be mindful that we aren't displacing private enterprise in the community as that would be a disservice instead of a service.
 - Jenny wondered if there are any private sector businesses providing the kinds of transit services we are talking about. The general consensus is that the few private providers operating in the Valley target a different demographic.
- Jenny suggested perhaps Logan Health could play a larger role in providing or financing medical transportation.
 - Tagen said that perhaps Logan Health could expand the ASSIST program.
- Shawna asked if we have seen an uptick in ridership since Glacier Taxi went out of business.
 - Kristina said we haven't seen an increase in riders but did get an increase in calls from people outside of our service area looking for assistance.
 - Shawna mentioned the Health Department has given out vouchers in the past for taxi service.
- Kristina mentioned individuals in Whitefish could use the new commuter service to travel into Kalispell and then use the On-Demand service to get to their final destination.
- Lisa noted that last year we included developing and implementing transit options for employees to get to work as a high priority. Members confirmed this is still a priority for FY 2022.
 - Members discussed the potential need for weekend and evening service for workers.

- Kyle mentioned that if there was park & ride service from Columbia Falls to Glacier National Park, he would use it. He would also use public transit to go to the airport, or to get to and from Whitefish, or to go to local festivals and events. He believes other people would also to eliminate the need to find parking and to avoid drinking and driving.
 - Lisa said that part of the Mountain Climber vision is to provide recreational travel that is important to residents and visitors alike and supports local businesses.
- Lisa asked the group if we still want to prioritize commuter service that, in addition to aiding worker mobility, supports economic sustainability and growth by connecting our cities and other points of interest. Members indicated agreement.
- Commissioner Brodehl noted we need to determine what should be taxpayer supported and what would require others to pay into the system, whether that be users or other partners who would benefit from the service.
 - Jenny noted most people who use the bus to get to work are employed at low paying jobs and public transit helps them make ends meet.
 - Shawna noted that taxpayers benefit when public transportation takes vehicles off the roads. Jenny concurred with the observation that the roads have become increasingly congested over the last 10 years.
 - Lisa added to Commissioner Brodehl's point noting that the broader vision of the Mountain Climber as a robust, integrated and connected transit system depends on substantial financial support from community partners. Federal, state and local tax dollars provide a basic foundation but community "ownership" and investment are critical to building a system that works for everyone.
- Lisa brought up that last year one of our priorities was to figure out a way to better serve Evergreen given the challenging demographics and geography. Members agreed we still want this as a priority.
 - Dale mentioned that over many years we've had requests for more service in Evergreen and for service in other smaller communities like Bigfork and Lakeside. We have experimented with a number of services in the past but have struggled to get enough ridership to justify the resources used. We should look at where and how to add service in light of overall demand and costs.
- Kyle suggested one of our priorities should be to include the cities in transit discussions and ask for more funding from them.
 - Lisa agreed, noting we need to do a better job of bringing them to the planning table and helping them think about how an investment in transit could help them address issues that are important to them.
 - Tagen mentioned that all three cities have future growth plans that could benefit from public transportation. Kyle agreed, saying we should help them make that connection.
 - Dale mentioned that we always need to be a bit cautious when we are asking for money as we want to make sure the cities or other partners understand what the funds can support, and what they can't. We don't want to over-promise.
- Commissioner Brodehl added that we should also include larger employers like Logan Health and Whitefish Mountain as well as Glacier National Park in our requests for financial support.
 - Kyle mentioned the hotels as important funding partners.
- Staff provided ridership data for the On-Demand service since its inception at the end of September, noting the steady increase in both riders and rides, which appear to be on track to meet or exceed ridership on the fixed/paratransit service.
 - Kevin asked if we have reached our max capacity. Lisa said we have not reached our max capacity but the system is very time consuming for dispatch, which has created some urgency

around purchasing the new software. The app will reduce the call volume, and the algorithm will increase routing efficiency, which in turn will add to our capacity.

- Jenny asked what kind of ridership we are seeing on the new Saturday ski run. Staff provided data.
- Jenny stated that she's looking forward to hearing the new director's ideas and experiences.
- Commissioner Brodehl mentioned that if you look across the state we have the 3rd oldest population and we also have the additional struggle of being so spread out.
- Lisa agreed with Randy and added that in addition to our area being older and very rural, we have a lot of visitors that show up every year.
- Kevin commented that in the process of rebranding to the Mountain Climber and planning for the future, we must not forget the older population and others who depend on transit that we have always served so well.
 - Kristina noted that a large number of our rides continue to be for older adults (29%) and people with disabilities (30%) but that we also provide a lot of general public rides (41%).
 - Lisa said that serving older adults and people with disabilities is an ongoing priority given our demographics. She reiterated that philosophy behind the Mountain Climber is that an inclusive system generates community support and investment which makes the system more robust for everyone.

Closing: In closing Lisa reviewed and summarized the agreed-upon priorities (highlighted in yellow above).

Meeting closed at 3:40 p.m.